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Austrian State Treaty of 1955

May 1985

Background: Austria's division into Allied occupation zones after World War II was intended to be temporary. However, Soviet efforts to control the Austrian economy and East-West deadlock over how to end the occupation threatened to leave Austria and its capital, Vienna, permanently divided into Eastern and Western zones. This outcome was prevented by the Austrian State Treaty of 1955, following which both Soviet and Western troops left Austria and the country emerged as an independent, unified, and neutral nation. The 30th anniversary of the signing is being celebrated this year in Vienna by the foreign ministers of Austria, its neighboring countries, and the former occupying powers.

Austria and Anschluss, 1918-1945: After World War I, an Austrian Republic was established in the German-speaking areas of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. The new republic was beset with internal divisions and in 1938 succumbed to pressure for Anschluss (union) with Nazi Germany, a unification explicitly prohibited by the Treaty of St. Germain in 1919. For the next 7 years, Austria was a German province.

As VE Day neared in 1945, three Allied armies were moving toward Vienna: the Red Army from the East, the Anglo-American 15th Army Group from Italy, and General Eisenhower's Allied army from southeastern Germany. Soviet forces arrived first and in April 1945 took Vienna in savage street fighting. The Soviet High Command failed to restrain its troops; the brutality of the liberation later undercut Soviet efforts to strengthen the Austrian Communist Party.

Occupation and East-West deadlock, 1945-1955: At their meeting in Moscow in October 1943, the US, UK, and USSR had agreed to restore a free and independent Austria after victory. To oversee this process, they established occupation zones for Austria assigning the eastern portion of the country to the USSR and the central portion to the US and UK. The western portion was later assigned to France. Vienna was placed under Four Power control, with an "international zone" in the heart of the old city.

In September 1945, an Austrian Government was established in Vienna. Free elections were held under Four Power supervision, and former Socialist chancellor Karl Renner was elected president.

Although the Renner government rapidly consolidated its authority, the Soviet Union and the Western Allies were unable to agree on ending the occupation because of Soviet efforts to control the Austrian economy. At Potsdam in July and August 1945, the Allies had agreed that "German assets" could be seized to meet the Soviet demands for reparations. Over Western protests, the Soviet Union interpreted this agreement in the broadest possible manner and began to take control of all important industries in its zone of Austria.

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The communist seizure of power in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 sharply heightened East-West tensions, increasing the difficulties of finding a satisfactory solution for Austria. Events in Germany, climaxing with the Berlin blockade, contributed to fears that Austria's division might become permanent. At the same time, the Austrian Communist Party was challenging Austria's democratic government. Communist agitation reached its height in May 1950 when a major strike and mass demonstrations almost overwhelmed the Austrian police.

Between 1947 and 1954, the Four Powers held nearly 400 inconclusive meetings to discuss Austria's future. The occupying powers could not agree on Soviet claims to Austrian assets or on Soviet demands for the enforced repatriation of Soviet citizens from Austrian refugee camps. They also disagreed over Austria's right to choose its international alignments and over the Soviet demand to station troops in Austria after a peace treaty was concluded.

Conclusion of treaty, May 1955: The way to a solution was opened by a sudden thaw in the Cold War after the death of Stalin. Historians believe that the new leaders in the Kremlin were anxious to prevent consolidation of NATO and the rearmament of West Germany and apparently believed a neutral Austria could aid in achieving this goal.

Taking advantage of this opening, the Austrian Government negotiated with the Soviets an agreement in which the USSR abandoned its claims to intervene in Austria's internal affairs and to garrison troops in Austria after a peace settlement; reduced its economic demands; and agreed to permit creation of a lightly armed Austrian defense force.

After hard bargaining that reduced Soviet demands, the Western powers agreed to these terms as the basis for a treaty ending Austria's occupation. On May 15, 1955, the Austrian State Treaty was signed in Vienna by the Foreign Ministers of the four occupying powers. The last Soviet troops left Austria on September 19, 1955. In October, the Austrian parliament approved a law defining the terms of that nation's permanent neutrality, and Austria resumed its place in international affairs.

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